

COMMENT
AND
CORRESPONDENCE

MARITIME STRATEGIES

To the Editor:

In their article published in your fall issue, "Preparing for the Unexpected: the Need for a New Military Strategy," Admiral Stansfield Turner and Captain George Thibault make a lot of sensible recommendations for reorienting the U.S. Navy toward its traditional sea control mission. Just as they acknowledge the validity of the criticism expressed in my own article in your summer issue—"Maritime Strategy vs. Coalition Defense"—of "the direction in which the U.S. Navy is moving under the Administration's defense program," I in turn believe that their suggestions for the kind of navy we should build would go far to provide the indispensable maritime superiority component of any sound coalition defense (though, like Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, I would also proliferate cruise missiles for sea control/land attack).

When they delve into the realm of strategy, however, they seem to be arguing for just another variant of maritime supremacy. They say let the Europeans and others in Eurasia defend themselves, while the United States concentrates on dominating the seas and posturing to "intervene with forces in unexpected and remote areas" (unspecified, but presumably in the Third World). Here Admiral Turner falls prey to what I called the "likelihood fallacy"—designing primarily against more likely threats at the expense of more critical ones.

The logical objective of any strategy should be to protect one's vital interests. As Lord Palmerston said, there are no permanent allies, only permanent interests. Look how Japan and Germany, the two powers against whom we fought World War II, have become our strongest allies, while our erstwhile Russian allies are now our main adversary. Since the U.S.S.R.'s growing military power creates the chief threat to our interests, it stands to reason that the principal (though not only) aim of our strategy must still be to prevent the U.S.S.R. from decisively altering the world balance of power by achieving dominant influence over the world's other two major industrial complexes—Western Europe and Japan—or their economic lifeblood, oil from the Persian Gulf.

Unfortunately, all three of these vital overseas interests lie on the fringes of the Eurasian heartland, hence vulnerable to Soviet pressure even if the United States controlled all the seven seas. Though sea control is essential to help defend these interests, it alone cannot suffice. We need balanced air and ground as well as maritime capabilities—a fact the U.S. Navy (which insists on its own army and its own air force) ought not to find difficult to grasp.

Nor does my focus on these three widely separated areas seem to merit the pejorative term "Atlanticist"; perhaps "Eurasianist" would be more accurate. If Admiral Turner also finds my article a "strong argument against change," so be it. Actually, I called for a major change in strategy, but it was away from that overreliance on nuclear deterrence which Secretary James Schlesinger called the "fatal flaw in our Western alliance system." This is the real issue we must confront.

Nor can the United States realistically expect to cope alone with Soviet

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conventional military power. Democratic societies are simply not going to spend 15 to 18 percent of their GNP on defense in peacetime, as can the U.S.S.R. Fortunately, we don't even have to try. Instead we can exploit our greatest strategic advantage over the U.S.S.R., which is that we have many rich allies and friends, while they have only a few poor ones. This is why a coalition approach makes such sense for the United States and its allies.

It is also putting words in my mouth to allege that I showed "concern" lest shifting "toward sea control, amphibious projection and more mobile follow-on ground and air forces will decrease our readiness in Europe." I have long favored all three as essential to coalition defense. My concern was rather, in the words of their own fair summary of my view on the point, that the type of Navy required for a maritime strategy built around a few supercarriers "would in time starve the other Services." Even they admit my concern is valid, since this is the kind of Navy we are building. And funding it is starving even the three capabilities they cite as needed.

I prefer Admiral Turner's Navy to the one at which the Reagan Administration is aiming. But his vague call for "a new military strategy" based on willingness to look at U.S. security needs "with an open mind" smacks instead of the same old unilateralist naval parochialism which is again in the ascendant.

ROBERT W. KOMER
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Komer was formerly Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and Advisor to the Secretary of Defense for NATO Affairs.

Admiral Turner and Captain Thibault reply:

Mr. Komer labors under the impression that a maritime strategy is intended only to dominate the seas and to intervene in the Third World. Instead, a properly defined maritime strategy is one of being able to move forces and goods over the seas, by ship or by aircraft, *wherever* needed. That includes Europe. Twice in this century the United States has come to the rescue of Europe by sending an expeditionary force across the seas. We may need to do that again and we may also need to go elsewhere. What we are suggesting today is not total withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe, but a new emphasis on building U.S. ground and air forces that can move quickly either to Europe or to other areas, and the sea power and airlift to ensure that they can get there.

Mr. Komer stresses that in addition to Europe, our strategy must include Japan and the Persian Gulf. It is difficult to understand how he believes we are going to cover these other two areas within the strategy that he advocates. Surely we are not adequately prepared to use force today in these areas precisely because the type of forces we have built with Europe in mind cannot be moved rapidly enough over such distances.

The shift in emphasis which we are advocating is one of being capable of moving to any of the Mr. Komer's three areas or to any others that might come to be of importance to U.S. interests.

In fact, it seems, Mr. Komer makes the case for this by pointing out that "... there are no permanent allies, only permanent interests." Our plea is not to build a U.S. military structure that is utterly dependent on a continuation of the same type of alliance relationship with the Europeans that we've known since World War II. Yes, the United States must be aware that there are no

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permanent allies, because we can clearly see that the Alliance is evolving into something quite different than we've known. Let us see if we can't build some flexibility into our military posture so that we can still play a significant role in Europe, but at the same time be ready for other contingencies as well.

To the Editor:

Readers of your summer and fall issues must have been entertained by the back-to-back critiques of U.S. strategy and naval plans by Mr. Komer and Admiral Turner. If these gentlemen are to be believed, the Reagan defense program is undermining the NATO alliance by concentrating on a maritime strategy and, to compound the error, the Navy is building the wrong type of ship for the wrong type of naval mission.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that both authors rely on defective rhetorical devices at variance with fact. Mr. Komer sets up the straw man of coalition defense versus maritime strategy. Yet he admits that control of the seas is a prerequisite to the successful coalition defense of NATO that he and so many of us advocate—including President Reagan. Mr. Komer's thesis that giving priority to the long overdue strengthening of the Navy will somehow weaken our ties with NATO can make sense only if we do so at the expense of NATO land forces—his implication. But this is bizarre. I am perplexed that he ignores the fact that President Reagan is providing a much higher resource level for NATO as a whole than did the Carter Administration. It is therefore difficult to see what is bothering Mr. Komer, unless he really believes that the new emphasis on the Navy indicates some sort of isolationist revival predicated on the United States going it alone. I can assure him that the nature of the Navy's business simply does not permit such isolationism.

This charge, however, might be better leveled at Admiral Turner and his colleague, who are in pursuit of that Holy Grail, a "new" military strategy. They do reject the coalition approach, but on the singularly odd ground that over the years it has not left us with adequate forces—either in Europe or in other areas. This may or may not be true; but even if one acknowledges shortfalls in our defenses, this does not discredit coalition strategy—it only discredits policies that have failed to provide the *means* for the strategy, notably policies of the Administration in which Admiral Turner was a senior official. President Reagan's defense budget certainly aims to correct this deficiency, which is now widely recognized in the Congress and by the American people.

Speaking of the means, Admiral Turner devotes most of his space to an attack on the *Nimitz*-type carrier as too large, destined for the wrong mission and out-of-step with technological advances, which decree simpler warplanes, with more sophisticated missiles, hence smaller decks. The misuse of the Falklands War in support of this argument has already become a kind of cottage industry but I think it suffices to cite Admiral Turner's own larger judgments: that (1) the smaller carriers themselves will not necessarily cost less and, (2) the larger carriers will be the backbone of the fleet for the next 20 years anyway.

If these judgments are accurate, then one can ask what the entire fuss is about. Surely one of the most desirable aspects of the current naval program is the rapidity with which it gives the Navy what it needs to control the seas—within a few years. Are we to postpone this buildup, so that a new generation of technology (the smaller carriers and the more sophisticated missiles to be fired by the less-sophisticated planes) is perfected? This is the discredited

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technique of the Carter Administration: to satisfy the budget cutters and the defense reductionists with small "in-year" expenditures and to satisfy the strategists and our nervous allies with promises of technology to come in big "out-year" expenditures. Somehow in that process the out years never came and the Navy continued to shrink, which led ultimately to a redefinition of mission, whereby control of the seas was dropped and convoying was to be established as the naval mission.

Such a passive defense will not work and it has never worked. Militarily, we simply do not have the merchant fleet to sustain the war of attrition that would result. Success in the maritime theaters, without which there can be no success in the land theaters, is impossible without a forward strategy of maneuver, initiative and offense.

I must conclude, then, that Admiral Turner wants it both ways: both the safety of the big ships and the applause of the salons as he advocates the smaller ships and newer technology. His fear, shared by Mr. Komer, that today's Navy program will somehow weaken NATO, is baseless. His alternative strategy for "sea control" would work only to diminish both our security and the security of our allies. Only a balanced strategy of maritime superiority, and a well-postured forward defense consisting of air, ground and sea forces in concert with our allies, can provide for the peace and stability which must be our objective.

JOHN LEHMAN
Secretary of the Navy
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Komer replies:

Secretary Lehman clearly wins the prize for rhetoric. The only trouble is that he ignores the facts. I'd certainly agree with his call for a "balanced strategy . . . in concert with our allies." But spending over \$50 billion on three new nuclear carrier battle groups will still be at the expense of that balance, even if President Reagan gets all the defense spending he asks. And what do these big carriers really buy us, as compared with investing those constrained defense dollars more wisely?

It's a pity that both Admiral Turner and Secretary Lehman construe the issue as only involving NATO. A maritime supremacy strategy based on costly big carriers does not suffice to protect our vital interests in the Persian Gulf or Northeast Asia either—even though, as both have pointed out, it is great for sideshows like the Falkland Islands.

Let's not lose sight of the real issue. We all three agree that the United States and its allies must have maritime superiority; our argument is over how much of what kind of Navy, at what cost, is essential for this purpose. Admiral Turner's and Secretary Lehman's comments only reinforce my concern lest, given all the pressures to cut the Reagan defense program, its main achievement will end up being the wrong kind of costly 600-ship Navy—at the expense of our larger strategic needs.

Admiral Turner replies:

Secretary Lehman attacks both Mr. Komer and myself in terms of Carterites versus Reaganites. The last thing that we need in this discussion of basic military strategies is partisan political polemics.

When the Secretary gets specific in his criticisms he sets forth the Catch-22

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that has bedeviled the Navy for at least 20 years:

—We need a rapid buildup of our sea power.

—Therefore we must continue building what is familiar, i.e., large aircraft carriers.

—Then, there is no rush to develop alternative, new technologies—e.g., vertical-take off aircraft—because they are not needed on the traditional large ships that we are building.

The new large carriers which the Secretary wants to build quickly will be with us into the 2020s. This haste today will almost ensure that we'll enter a future war with the weapons of the last one.

Surprisingly, Secretary Lehman expresses concern that the Navy is going to continue to shrink. He himself is encouraging that by concentrating more and more of the value of the Navy in fewer and fewer ships. I doubt that even he can any longer take his much vaunted plan for a 600-ship Navy seriously. There are a wide range of studies, even by such pro-defense organizations as the American Enterprise Institute, that demonstrate that the Navy is going to continue to decline toward 400 ships rather than increase. The reason is that the type of ships that are being purchased are so expensive.

The Navy's present shipbuilding plan is just like almost all the plans that have gone before it: it is heavily dependent on a substantial increase in congressional funding for shipbuilding a few years down the track. For instance, the Navy's present plan calls for 2.4 times as many dollars for ships in the fiscal 1988 budget as in the 1984 budget. With this kind of wishful optimism, the Navy's record over many years has been one of actually building less than half of the ships it has planned. Mr. Lehman can hardly pretend that he feels congressional and public opinion today are likely to support an increase in Navy funding by a factor like 2.4.

Finally, the Secretary advocates a strategy for the Navy of "... maneuver, initiative and offense." Presumably he is reaffirming his many public statements that our Navy is going to be capable of carrying the war right to the Soviets' home bases and airfields. That sounds stirring and patriotic. The only problem is that I have yet to find one Admiral who believes that the U.S. Navy would even attempt it.